

6-1-1952

The Basis of Our Faith

W. F. Beck

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Beck, W. F. (1952) "The Basis of Our Faith," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 23, Article 32.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol23/iss1/32>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

The Basis of Our Faith.

By W. F. BECK

NOT IN MAN

WHAT would happen if you did not believe your map, your neighbor, your groceryman, or your doctor? — Faith is the rule of our life. The world believes; it could hardly go on without believing.

There is no unbelief;
Whoever plants a seed beneath the sod
And waits to see it push away the clod,
He trusts in God. — E. Y. CASE.

"The greatest part of our knowledge is implicit faith" (Samuel Johnson). We regularly face problems for which there is no solution except faith. In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark (William James). An intelligent use of such faith may be a mark of success.

Experience is a dumb, dead thing;
The victory's in believing. — LOWELL.

This kind of faith may resemble, but is not saving faith. Often it is too easygoing and provides happy hunting for "confidence men" in religion.

A careful person insists on evidence. He is critical. He will be interested in the proofs for the existence of God and other apologetic evidence for the Christian faith. He is delighted to see that Christianity has met human needs better than any other religion (the pragmatic evidence) and finds such practical values a potent demonstration of its truth. But we do not reach our Savior along the lines of logic, of premises and inferences. We do not find God at the end of a philosophical search — He is standing on our doorstep. He simply appears in our midst and is accepted for "reasons of the heart" (Pascal) that cannot be tested.

There is the collier's faith, a faith without knowledge, a blind faith. It is a kind of "divine" feeling of being lifted up, often by beautiful words whose meaning is not important. It holds to thin air, floats above reality, and sometimes rather cheerfully looks to the stars — only to fall into a ditch. It needs the weights of truth to pull it down.

But there is also a head knowledge, which leaves the heart cold and dead, without terror of sin or joy of forgiveness. That was the trouble with the scribes who showed the Wise Men the way to Bethlehem but did not go there themselves (Matt. 2:3-6). Later Jesus asked the men at the Temple, "If I tell you the truth, why don't you believe Me?" (John 8:46.)* James (2:19) said: "You believe there is one God. That is good. The devils also believe that — and shudder." Faust (I:412) says, "Die Botschaft hoer' ich wohl, allein mir fehlt der Glaube." We are told of a man who memorized the Bible but did not know the way to heaven. Such knowledge is no nearer heaven than that of a gambler, dreaming of winnings, or that of a modern materialist who knows all pleasures and luxuries from vivid visual portrayals but happens to be without the money to enjoy them. Such religious knowledge condemns a man to loneliness; he is like a rock, chiseled into artistic form, but lying a few feet from the building for which it was intended.

We pastors may relapse into a similar head knowledge. The Emmaus disciples "went back and told the others, but these did not believe them" (Mark 16:13; cp. v. 14). There happens to be no special stately arch of knowledge through which a theologian enters the treasure house of truth. Faith is the only door. A pastor and his layman may differ widely in knowledge; yet each must stoop and believe like a child in order to come to God.

It is even possible to speak well of Jesus (Luke 4:22) without coming to Him. Herod liked to hear John the Baptizer (Mark 6:20). Sergius Paulus "called for Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the Word of God" (Acts 13:7). The whole town of Antioch near Pisidia came together to hear the Word (v. 44). And Felix was frightened when Paul spoke to him about the judgment (Acts 24:25). Especially when conscience shows the effectiveness of the Law in men's hearts and the Spirit is perhaps shaking them out of their complacency, they may feel helpless and may tremble without turning to God.

Sometimes faith is based on quasi-miraculous healings, used like

* For approximately fifteen years the author has been working independently in preparing a modern translation of the Bible. All Scripture references in this article are given in the author's version. — F. E. M.

trump cards by the Roman Catholic Church and some evangelists, as a proof of the truth of all that a particular Church teaches. We recognize miracles as secondary evidence. Jesus said, "If you do not trust Me, trust My works" (John 10:38; cp. 5:36; 10:25; 14:10-11; 15:24). But He sharply criticized anyone who waited for supernatural proofs and miracles before he would believe: "If you do not see wonderful proofs and miracles, you will not believe" (John 4:48; cp. v. 39). After the resurrection He told Thomas, "Blessed are those who did not see Me, and yet believed" (John 20:29). Paul says, "If we hope for something that we see, we really do not hope" (Rom. 8:24). That is the official attitude of the Church of Christ toward miracles.

Again, a belief may be based too much on a believer's wish. Caesar (*Gallic War*, III:18) said, "Men willingly believe what they wish." E. Young: "What ardently we wish, we soon believe." H. M. Kallen (*Why Religion*, 1927, p. 88) says of items for which there is little evidence: "As they are precious and desirable and too fleeting and impotent to stay in our environment of themselves, we supply the staying power from our own hearts. What they seem to lack we contribute. And that which we contribute is belief. . . . And it speaks for our desires and our needs, not for the powers of the objects we believe in. We believe also in the objects that impose themselves upon us by their inner force. But our belief in those objects is passive; it is acquiescence, not preference; while our belief in these ethereal and passing entities is active, a preference, not acquiescence." Much comfort in trouble, especially at the death of unchristians, is flowery self-persuasion without a basis in fact. We show the same fault when we are "choosy" about the Biblical truths which we accept. We dare not be subjective and arbitrary, making ourselves the judges who decide which voice of God they'll tune in as they read His book. Modernists are trying hard to find a Christ apart from the Bible by shaping Him according to their own ideals, and so they lose both Christ and the Bible (cp. Mark 4:15). Only in heaven shall we see Him without the Bible, "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). "If anyone teaches anything else and will not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and godly teaching, he is proud and knows nothing" (1 Tim. 6:3-4). The creations of our own hearts may be a pleasant opiate, but they help no one. We

must clear them away as rubbish and as an abomination in the temple where God's children come to worship.

The unbeliever's difficulty is not that the saving truths are in themselves so incredible; too many absurdities have been held to be true by our gullible race. The real negative to a missionary's invitation is not, "I don't think what you say is true," but, "I don't like it." "The natural man does not welcome the thoughts of the Spirit of God; he thinks they are foolish and cannot understand them, because you must have the Spirit to see their real value" (1 Cor. 2:14). Coupled with his dislike is the prospect's inability to change his habits organized in opposition to God. "The mind of the flesh hates God. It refuses to obey the Law of God, because it cannot obey it" (Rom. 8:7; cp. 1 Cor. 1:23). "The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit" (Gal. 5:27).

So our natural ways to save ourselves must fail and come to nothing. "The wise will be ashamed; they will be dumbfounded and taken; they have rejected the Word of the Lord. And what wisdom have they?" (Jer. 8:9; cp. Micah 3:7.) The false ways may multiply for people who do not accept God's way. "For that reason God sends them a strong delusion so they will believe a lie" (2 Thess. 2:11). All human ways of believing fail to please God (Heb. 11:6), since they are the hopeless ways of works. "There is a curse on all who depend on doing what the Law says" (Gal. 3:10). Without believing in Christ there is no hope. "You were then without Christ. . . . You were without hope or God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). "If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins" (John 8:24).

The origin and basis of Christian faith is —

IN GOD

"When the right time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to free us who were under the Law and to make us His sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). He says, "I am the living Bread that came down from heaven. . . . The bread that I will give is My flesh, which I give for the life of the world." (John 6:51.) "God made Him who did not know sin to be sin for us that we in Him

should be made the righteousness of God." "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself by not counting their sins against them." (2 Cor. 5:21, 19.)

Jesus "finished" the task of our salvation (John 19:28, 30); no other saving action is needed. Jesus is the Way, Truth, Life, Bread, Water, Light of the world (John 14:6; 6:35; 4:14; 8:12). The righteousness, which God planned, in Christ prepared, and by His verdict made our own, is far better than the best that men could do (see Matt. 5:20). God saw that it was good. John the Baptizer is "to tell His people their sins are forgiven and they can be saved" (Luke 1:77; cp. Col. 2:13; Heb. 1:3; 1 John 1:7; 2:1-2).

God tells us about all that He has prepared for us, and when He speaks, He gives. His Word contains and brings Christ (John 5:39; 17:8), the λόγος, who became flesh (John 1:1-2, 14), who suffered, died, and rose again. His Word is an expansion of the heavenly message: "Your Savior, who is Christ the Lord, was born today" (Luke 2:11). That was Paul's message: "While I was with you, I was determined to know only Jesus Christ, and Him Crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2); "I brought to you what I have received—it is most important—that Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3; cp. John 20:31; Acts 20:24). And in this Christ God gives us everything.

We can see what God gives us by contrasting what we are and have before and after conversion:

Forgiven

John 3:6

Ezek. 11:19

Rom. 6:13; Eph. 2:5

Rom. 6:6; 7:25

Before

a child of flesh

a stony heart

dead in sin

a slave of sin

After

a child of God

a heart of flesh

living in righteousness

a servant of God

Free

Col. 1:13; Acts 26:18

John 1:17; Rom. 6:14

Heb. 9:14

Rom. 5:1

Rom. 8:7, 28

Gal. 3:10-14

Gen. 3:8; Eph. 2:12-18

under the tyranny
of darkness

under the Law

a bad conscience

quarreling with God

hating God

under the curse

fleeing from God

in the kingdom of God's
Son

under love

a good conscience

at peace with God

loving God

under God's blessing

coming to God

God's Own

1 Pet. 2:25	a lost sheep	under the Shepherd
Matt. 6:31-32	subject to any misfortune	under the Father's protection
Rom. 8:35-37	defeated	victorious
Eph. 2:12; 4:4	despairing	hopeful
Titus 3:3-7	an heir of hell	an heir of heaven

I ask you, how can a creed which gives all that be called a burden by men who boast of their free mind as they deny what God says and of their courage as they reject what God gives? Or how can we pastors as carriers of such priceless gifts ever do the least of our task with a sour face?

Unbelief forfeits all of this (Luke 7:30), returns to chains and slavery, to eat its own bitter damnation. "He came to His own, and His own people did not accept Him. But to all who accepted Him and believe in His name He gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:11-12.) By believing we accept God's gifts, particularly His righteousness. "We are considered righteous if we believe in Him who raised from the dead our Lord Jesus, who was put to death for our sins and was raised to declare us righteous" (Rom. 4:24-25; cp. 10:9).

Paul says that the righteousness which God gives is intended for faith (*εις πιστιν*, Rom. 1:17), as food is intended for the mouth and air for the lungs. Righteousness fits faith as a kernel fits its shell. It does not fit anyone who trusts in himself, but it exactly meets the need of him who, despairing of his good works, believes. Righteousness finds an exact counterpart in faith, because faith lacks merit; it is like a good auditorium which has no echo or noise of its own to compete with the speaker's voice.

Faith fits righteousness, because faith can take what is invisible. The blood of the Passover was painted on the lintel and the doorposts. The Israelite who celebrated the festival within his home most likely could not see the blood. We cannot see our righteousness, but God can; and that is enough for faith.

God chose the way of faith, because He wanted to reach every kind of person (Ezek. 33:11; 1 Tim. 2:4): the thief and the Apostle, the failure and the success, the poor and the rich, the weak and the mighty, the simple and the learned—righteousness by faith, a most democratic leveler of people, fits everyone of them.

Faith is produced by His Word, which is a promise (Ps. 119: 49-50; Rom. 4:18-22) and a gift of power (John 11:43; 1 Cor. 1:18; Heb. 4:12). Commanded by God, Moses raises his rod over the Red Sea, and the waters part; Joshua and Israel march around Jericho, and its walls collapse. No one who took Jesus at His word ever failed. He told the King's officer, "'Go. Your son lives.' The man believed what Jesus told him and went." (John 4:50.) Peter says, "Because You say so, I will let down the nets" (Luke 5:5). "Just say a word," says the Roman captain (Matt. 8:8). In His Word, God has chosen to reveal His mighty arm (Is. 53:1).

By such a power the Word creates faith in us. We are the "people who through their [the disciples'] Word believe in Me" (John 17:20). "If you tell people about Christ, they will hear, and such hearing produces faith" (Rom. 10:17; cp. Jer. 31:34; Col. 1:6). We serve as carriers of this mighty Word. "Who is Apollos now? Or who is Paul? Men by whose help you came to believe, and each of us has only what the Lord gave him" (1 Cor. 3:5).

We cannot be proud as though we had produced faith in ourselves or in others. "I do not mean that we can do anything by ourselves or can claim that anything came from us, but God gives us our ability" (2 Cor. 3:5). "When I spoke and preached, I did not use words of wisdom to persuade you, but I let the Spirit and His power prove the truth to you in order that your faith may not depend on the wisdom of men but on the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:4-5; cp. 12:3). God works faith in us. "A person can come to Me only if the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44; cp. v. 65). When the Christians in Jerusalem had heard Peter's report about Cornelius, they praised God, saying, "Then God has given repentance also to the people who are not Jews that they may live" (Acts 11:18). God says, "I will take the stony heart out of their bodies and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 11:19; cp. Jer. 31: 18-19). "It was given to you . . . to believe in Christ" (Phil. 1:29). It is "Jesus who has given us our faith and makes us perfect in it" (Heb. 12:2). "The Good News we brought to you did not prove to be only words, but it carried power and the Holy Spirit and a full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5). So we see "how immeasurably great is His power working in us who believe" (Eph. 1:19; cp. Phil.

2:13). Luther says: "When God creates faith in a man, it is as great an accomplishment as if He created heaven and earth again" (Walch IX:972).

The impulse to bring God and us together comes from God. We flee. God pursues us, overcomes the distance, and breaks through the opposition in order to bring us back. His loving capture makes us willing to surrender. His mercy, challenging and pulling us, makes us want to come to Him. His drawing becomes our seeking; His giving, our taking; His asking, our "yes"; His assurance, our "Amen."

Christian truth is not something that we try to make ourselves believe; it is a message which we find we cannot disbelieve. God pours His love into our hearts (Rom. 5:5) with an urgency that we cannot escape. Test it by reading John 3 or chapters 14—17, and after each section say to yourself, "It isn't true." It just can't be done. This inner compulsion, which overwhelms us, is the certainty of faith.

Our surrender to the truth is not a sullen submission. Tasting God's mercy, we are really persuaded. We see the Savior's gentle way in the words: "I gave them the words You gave Me, and they learned the truth that I came from You, and they believe that You sent Me" (John 17:8).

As we believe what God tells us about His Son (1 John 5:9-10), we become righteous. "This righteousness of God comes without the Law to all who believe, just by their believing in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 3:22; cp. Is. 45:24-25; Rom. 3:25-26; 4:5; 10:4, 10; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 22; Phil. 3:9; Heb. 11:7). We are now "holy sinners": There was nothing in us to which we could point and say, "Here I did not need forgiveness"; now there is nothing to which we could not point and say, "It is holy." Luther expresses this thought in his classic axiom: *Christianus est simul iustus et simul peccator*.

"His love saved you through faith; you didn't do it—it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). "I am not ashamed of the Good News, because it is God's power to save everyone who believes it" (Rom. 1:16).

Real faith is always individual faith. The salvation which God has prepared for all (John 1:29; 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Tim. 2:6) reaches its goal only when an individual says, "I believe." Then the

universal fact of the salvation of the human race becomes a personal, intellectual and emotional, bond between a man and his God.

In Luther's time and before that, men who had lived an evil life and were afraid to die would send to a monastery for a monk's garb in which they wanted to be buried. — Ah Koh, the Chinese postman in an inland city of China, handed out the letters to the missionary. As he did so, he bemoaned the feebleness of his advancing years; then remarked, "Oh, well, it will not be long before I am in my heavenly home." "But, Ah Koh," objected the missionary, "you have not accepted Christ. How can you expect to reach heaven?" The old man responded hopefully, "Surely, after I've brought letters to you all these years, one of you will get me in." — A banker once answered my invitation by saying, "My wife has religion enough for both of us." Men can be led by other believers to believe, but they cannot depend on them to believe for them. Laymen cannot be at ease because their pastor has a fine conviction or because the church to which they belong is sound. Belief that isn't individual is unbelief.

We may have our difficulties with the threefold description of faith: knowledge, assent, trust. We may have knowledge and assent without faith; but trust always includes knowledge and assent. The devil can say, "Christ is a Savior"; only a Christian can say, "Christ is my Savior." If assent means, "It is true," then trust means, "It is true for me." Knowledge = the story of Jesus; certainty = it is true that Jesus saves; trust = He saves me. A child is in the upper room of a burning house. A strong man stands below and calls, "Drop into my arms." The child may be convinced that the man is there and he is strong; but the essence of faith is to drop into his arms. Whenever a term means the personal acceptance of the Savior, it means faith. In the following, "knowing" is "believing": "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25); "My sheep know Me" (John 10:14); "to know You and Jesus Christ whom You sent is everlasting life" (17:2; cp. 6:69; Gal. 4:8-9; Phil. 3:8; 1 Tim. 2:4).

Faith is a simple thing, a child's hand. The Bible tells us very little about the faith of infants. But Jesus took a child, set him before the disciples, and said, "Be like that" (Matt. 18:1-10; 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17). Luke tells us about the faith of John the Baptizer

before he was born (Luke 1:15, 41). A child's faith can be unconscious, but we do not call it inactive or potential; that would idealize the faith of an adult. It is a simple act, perhaps like a thought before you reflect on it. A little girl looks at a picture of Jesus blessing little children, and, pointing to the one in His arms, she says, "That's me." You look at Peter being rescued from the waters and say, "That's I," or, "I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord."

God's way of salvation by faith is for simple people. A Greek philosopher is supposed to have written over his door, "None but the learned may enter here." But over the Door of Christ there is written: "Let children and simple people come to Me." Jesus said, "Knock." If the door were heavily locked, an expert with special tools might be needed to open it. But a dumb man, a blind man, a fool, can knock; one who cannot read or write can knock. Remember what one poor woman did. She did not take hold of Christ with her hands or throw her arms around His knees; she stretched out her fingers, and then she did not touch Christ's feet or even His dress, but the tassel of His garment; and she was made well (Luke 8:43-44). What she did was simplicity itself. She merely touched the tassel. You can be saved without saying a word. Just believe, take Him, if not with a hand's clasp, then with a finger's touch, and live. The remedy against death in the desert was a simple thing (Num. 21:4-9). Moses didn't say, "Bow down several times before this copper serpent." He didn't make patients touch it or apply it to their wounds. They were to look. What could be easier? The brazen serpent could be seen from different parts of the camp, and however far away the dying person might be, Moses said, "Look." A glance from the distance brought healing. When the sun sank and darkness came, the snake on the pole might be seen only dimly; it didn't matter: The sick man was to do what he was told — look at it in the dusk; it would be as effective as in the light. And a blind man might turn sightless eyeballs toward the Cross of Jesus and see nothing; yet if he looked, he would live. Just look, and you will live.

St. Louis, Mo.